POETRY
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024

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POETRY
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024

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POEMS

Adrian Matejka

Editor's Note

The start of a new year is always a time of difficult reflection for me. Every January, in the thick of winter, my introspection is catalyzed by the litany of weeks when nights are appreciably longer than days. For those who trundle forward heart-first in the habit of poets, this particular new year feels even heavier than usual, full of a multiplicity of emotions: melancholy, anger, worry, and desire—for closeness, for wonder, for change.

Unsettled moments like these are when I turn to poetry. The kind of poems that allow me to blossom in my paradoxes and remaking the way "My Hair Burned Like Berenice," the opening poem of this issue by Ruth Awad, does. Or the kind of ekphrastic poetry that uses visual art to try to codify loss and grief, as in Victoria Chang's poem "Today." These poems examine so many things related to but not only of the winter season: revelations that remind me spring will be here soon, but not too soon, and the hoarfrost will linger in the meantime. The work of these incomparable poets, in conversation with the many other exceptional and wide-ranging versifiers in this issue, help me to imagine a different present. After reading these poets, I am challenged and inspired to use the most daydreamy parts of myself to make it to spring. I'm challenged to be in the world as both metaphor and embodiment.

This inspiration is not just coming from the poems in this issue. Craig Morgan Teicher reflects on the ways that Terrance Hayes re-envisions his personal canon and, in doing so, nods to a necessarily modern kind of literary criticism that is part visual history, part memoir, and part lesson on poetic craft. At the same time, Robert Fernandez's "Not Too Hard to Master" essay and writing prompt empower us to create poetry from whatever media and mediums inspire us. He charges us to make the art we couldn't have imagined before this moment.

The beautiful celebrations and dissatisfactions of the poems, alongside Fernandez's and Teicher's essays, remind me that we need to write it weird, sing it in an imaginary key, headspin it in the opposite direction. Do whatever we must in order to enact the kind of art we want, whether the wind is whistling its tune or not, so that this year can be one of possibility instead of inevitability.

My Hair Burned Like Berenice

And after nailed upon the night
Berenice's burning hair.
—W.B. Yeats, "Her Dream"

Days of rain. The drey outside my window would keel
and the wind would plunder. My heart was valent
with possibility: I could be anyone now, half woman,
half asterism. Fragmental as a new year. Patron saint
of the rutilant and cindering. I could rove incognito
to places pinned in office calendars. Too long I'd
mothered myself with the admiration of onlookers.
I was grateful to be alone in my abstraction. To be both
ignored and abraded by a coarse sky. I did not offer up
parts of me like kindling. I will not embellish a single
hemisphere. The ground bulges with a wet sound.
It is glutted with what was given. I do the wolfish work
of god and make myself again. Ripen like lichen on
the pavement. Like rain carrying the memory of lightning.

D. A. Powell

Toast

Said my illness
I'm tired of being
serious all the
time I don't
like how you
treat me like
we haven't shared
the same apartments
for eighteen years
long enough to be
considered married
in some places
happy anniversary
21 I says anyways
who's counting

Learning to Paint

Firstly to confess lack of nearly all perspective.
Eye sees things at the ends of stalks of the mind
planted in the dull fat head and facing forward.
Sees things flatly and lacks the way round.
Consider this a lesson in how to see.
As with a poem or a play, we start with a line.
Where does it go, how does it go, that line.
Early humans had four principal colors
for drawing, but why limit.
The important thing is light. See light
make light shape light bend it into spheres
as heaven's hot bodies form in the void
take on the light. When the eye is dull
and deadening the round world flat again,
leave it slack and one feels the slackness vibrate.
Draw the reverberations inward and they'll emit
a phosphorescence against the dark.
Losing sight again is part of the journey.
How else to see angels. Angels are made of twilight.

Positivity

"Anyway, it isn't forever," Chris said,
"eventually you're dead." And we laughed

Besides, everything is better now. Not us
but implants, blenders, children, heart attacks.
There's never been a better time to be alive
than when you are. If you are. Black-throated
blue warbler says chewchewchewchewchewww
drawing the last chew out like a sucking drainpipe
to say he has mated and is satisfied. Say what
you will about that. His joy is uncontainable

and yet it has a form, a measure, to make it clear
he's not upset or feeling anxious. And if he's bragging,
well, it's no shame to brag that you're happy.

Honeybees cavorting on the goldenrod are working
toward a common goal they'll never see achieved.
They lay down the walls of their cathedral of honeycomb
and will not cope the spire, busy in the present task,
trusting that the work continues. I'd like to write
a children's book called *everybody dies.* Upbeat, of
course, and pragmatic. You only got so many
days. Don't think about death; when you're
ready, death will think about you. Go out
tonight with your friends, like Chris, who went out
big or not at all. Have a ball. Plan ahead.

Anti-Pastoral for Twenty-Faced Pathogen

Neither milkweed
nor rose-apple
in Schenck's *Anguish*,

only a murder
of crows sprouting
at the perimeter

of a mother's
suffering. Nature is
a near synonym

of cruelty—look
how I temple
its impure. Every

year, death-positive.
My kisses are
darts—I sweat

poison too heavy
for oleanders to carry.

In the quiet
of frost, death looks

on, wanting to be
important, & pulls
a lamb's head

under tires. If not
a metaphor,
then foreknowledge.

As a carpenter, Jesus
made chairs, tables,
shelves—investigating, all

the while, the
role of nails
in forgiveness. In

Schenck's *Anguish*, I
mistook a mother's
roar for a screech.

Neither rose-apple
nor milkweed here,
only the long con

of anger. As if
anger could raise
the dead, stop my liver

from losing color.
I know you are here
for no reason

other than to
make my skull
a flowerpot—amaryllises,

lilies, tulips—
a realm of dread
& decay. As

if my roaring
could still
a cytokine storm.

En el Suelo

La luna
busca algún agujero
en las casas de adobe
entra
y se sienta en el suelo.

On the Floor

Translated from the Spanish

The moon
finds holes
in adobe houses
then slips in
to sit on the floor.

Aullido

El viento
arrastra el llanto de la tarde
sobre las aguas del río.

Un coyote bebe,
su aullido es triste:
es el agua,
el agua,
agua.

Howl

Translated from the Spanish

The wind
trails the evening's cry
over the flowing river.

A coyote drinks:
his sad howl
is all water,
water,
water.

Venado

El día se acabó.

Un venado de cola blanca
masticó su último manojito de zacate,
recogió su sombra
y se perdió entre los barrancos.

Deer

Translated from the Spanish

The day is done:

a white-tailed deer
chews its last handful of grass,
gathers up its shadow
and fades into the ravines.

El Único Día

El único día en la vida
donde no se oculta el sol
se llama

esperanza.

One Day

Translated from the Spanish

The only day in life
where the sun doesn't set
is called

hope.

Ant Ode

Black and crackling curiosity,
you can take the crush of my hand
or glass or chair leg and skitter
away, the plastic of animals,
Teflon finger of the nest, chitin-bright
layer-down of trail and track,
mind with the brilliance of leg.

Part honeydew, part nectar,
part dead insect heads, the ever-
intent, riveted, every second
a fork in the road for you. Everybody
someone to know. Every softness
in the wood an opening for holes,
like me, a deconstructor, sawduster, in and out,

restless fan of food and water,
making shelter for the brood. I'm torn:
you'll riddle my place if I just
let you go; you'll outstrip me
until my walls are slow clockworks

of you. Where is the colony, though?
I want to know. Curiosity, ant,
wandering marriage of thing to thing,
you freeze under my eye,
hide in still, plain view. You

aren't my searching mind,
you're not a part of me.
You came from the woods
outside. I'm inside you.

Charm

Am I plastic enough. Did I
mold to the right shape—obedient
as water—feel hot, cool, smooth

to the touch. Was I flexible,
was I blue-green, and when dirty,
need just a slick of soap, and then

did I hold you in and repel
all else. Could I take it, heat, cold,
frozen, molten, could I

cover it up. Could I wrap myself
around what you wanted kept,
invisible almost, clear as ice. Could I stretch

and not crack, when I broke
could I break down to powder, to glitter,
to nothing, you hope,

to lace fish or bird or whatever
else except your flesh, could I stay
away from you, when told, get out

of your face. Was I buoyant. Was I
suddenly everywhere. Could I then
be recalled, remade, the strange

clear metal of myself come
back together in another,
fresher shape. If not,

could I just end. If not, could
I teach you how to bend,
to escape, to float—

Bruce Snider

Ode to a Dolly Parton Drag Queen

She lip-syncs "Hello God," then "9 to 5."
She struts. Or does she fly? Like the soul,
a rhinestone, she tells us, will never die.
She's a blush-pink Bible. Patched together,
she's a cosmic doll. Mirror of a mirror,
she winks, her face the only face. Anchors
of abundance, her breasts are the news—
more is more is more. A baptismal font,
a witch-walk down the last dirt road,
she's hillbilly blood on a silk bandana. Marilyn
or Medusa? Caked lipstick on a flatbed truck.
She's Styrofoam in a cowgirl case. Starlight
on a stage. She's all eyeliner. She will not scare.
She's the endless tease of her acrylic hair.

At the Rainbow Cattle Company

No matter who leads tonight, who follows,
I feel his stare as we work the floor.

He swaggers from heel to toe.
Is it his smile?
Or his eyes I can't ignore?

Even the lights wink, catching the pearled
buttons on his black paisley shirt.

The whole room tonight turns
on his crocodile boots, his porn mustache—

Mr. Crew Cut, Mr. High Firm Ass.
The mirrors on the wall show us

what we are and where we've been,
Shania singing: *the woman in me needs the man*

in you. What I give
is what he takes—
I move us hard until the music breaks.

——

He moves us hard until the music breaks.
I turn and almost trip. I fall behind.

He grips my hand,
taking me slow
through the Oak Ridge Boys, Patsy Cline.

The tempo shifts from sleep to wake.
I pull away. He stops. He never speaks

but stares me down. Hand on my hip,
he turns left, then right.
I'm the whip

he snaps. I'm the horse he rides.

He's what I want and what I fear—

in his arms, then not. My shadow glides
around me like a skirt.
                In the mirrors

we turn, step, spin. He won't let go.
How do you flirt—*quick-quick, slow-slow?*

——

I'm learning to flirt—*quick-quick, slow-slow*—
my blood a mix of cheap flat beer.

He smells of wilderness, hot road tar,
Crew pomade. Half horse plough,

half attitude, is he a tease?
                I don't know
his name, where he's from, can't hear what

he whispers in my ear.
                I've no excuse.
His horseshoe buckle shines beyond a doubt.

What's faith if not what I refuse
to know? Will he be a priest tomorrow,

a florist, a judge? He's a man now
on a mission with a gun. In the mirrors

we're here again
                with everywhere to go
no matter who leads tonight, who follows.

Victoria Chang

Today

On Kawara's "Today" series

Jan.4.2022
A call is just a call. I pick it up.

Jan.6.2022
I lift blankets looking for my father.

Jan.7.2022
When I take off the patch, your eye is gone.
I spend the day in other people's tears.

Jan.9.2022
Someone says your eyelid almost came off,
the doctors tried to reattach it. I
close my eye all day to see if I can
feel your dying. What is dying but a
form of hunger, visible to God. When
we pull down your shirt, your good eye opens.
All the waiting, the moon is an athlete.

Jan.11.2022
The woman who let you fall won't look at
me. In each of us, there is a stranger,
a single road that in one instant forks.

Jan.12.2022
There's a name for it. The way your mouth stays
open, no breathing. We hold our breaths as
if companions of your dying. *Cheyne-Stokes*,
named after two doctors. What if we named
everything? The last hand-squeeze before death,
the way your eye looks at me when I talk,
the way the reincarnated cry the
most, bewildered by the star's second blink.

Jan.13.2022
I tell a story about something, with
my arms waving. And your arm grabs mine, as
if I am a messiah. But really

I withheld food and drink from you so that
your feet that loved to walk would never touch
the ground again. And I wonder why we
are always on our hind legs, to see what?

Jan.15.2022
Maybe we feel dizzy because we are
moving and so is the earth. On some days,
I can tell the earth is rotating in
another direction. Today I meet
a hospice nurse named Harsh. He is sweet, sweet.

Jan.16.2022
They drop the morphine under your tongue. How
it must feel like a faint raindrop taken
from the sky. It's been two weeks since the fall
and death still catches me by surprise.
I feel nothing. It is raining morphine.

Jan.17.2022
No matter how I scold you, you won't die.
Meanwhile, there are no birds in the sky, they
have all flown into your brain. I always
knew that our thoughts were birds, but I didn't
know they would return for the funeral.

Jan.18.2022
Five breaths. Then a minute of not breathing.
I time it, announce it, as if you are
running a race. You would have loved winning
this race to annihilation. Because
you are winning, your mouth is shaped like an O,
has been open for fourteen days now, as
if to say you aren't done telling me
that Rilke's *Open* doesn't exist, that
our eyes aren't inverted, that we can see
everything an animal sees with our
eyes closed and our mouths open. If I lean in,
I can hear all the words said in your
life, now in a different order. There's still

no *love*, even though I've looked through all the
words twice. I go digging in the mass grave
of language for the extra loves and I
end up bringing *loneliness* back with me.

Jan.19.2022
Every phone call says the same thing, that *he
is hanging on.* And I imagine you
holding on to the edge of a building,
the city's mouths waiting for you to jump.

Jan.20.2022
Today is your birthday. Someone came in
and said, *they're still not feeding him?* thinking
I was someone else. The eyes press against
the glass of my brain. They can't touch me but
they won't stop looking. Eyeballs have footsteps
too. When they walk, they sound sticky. Hundreds
of them have gathered outside the window.

Jan.22.2022
The sky is crooked at my feet. I'm tired
of someone else's dying. I've lost two
pounds because I've been chewing rain instead
of swallowing it. Because you haven't
been eating or drinking, all the food I
eat tastes twice as dead. Twice as good. In the
room down the hall, a man has a stroke, half
of his body splits off. The caretakers
gossip. My sister won't stop crying, keeps
telling everyone she was your *favorite.*

Jan.23.2022
They called me at 4:30 AM and
I don't remember what they said. But I
know they never said the word *death* or *died.*

Jan.24.2022
The funeral home calls and I open
your checkbook, a balance of mocking birds.

Jan.26.2022
On my notebook, a large group of ants. I
wonder why they had only gathered there
and on Etel Adnan's *Time.* They walk on
these words: *When no one is waiting for us*
any longer, there's death, so faithful. I
spend the morning killing ants and wonder
how many insects I have killed until
now. All the killing to prepare me to
forgo the feeding tube. Yesterday I
drove past a group of boys running without
their shirts. At the stoplight I could only
see the way their sweat lifted from them. And
I realized the ants weren't coming from the
floor but were coming from my words. Down the
road, another group of runners going
in the opposite direction, having
no idea of the other runners. All
this time, I thought I didn't know a thing.

Jan.27.2022
When death was near, I could touch time. It was
softer than I thought it would be. There were
two of them. When I tried to measure their
lengths, I was sent back to the living. I
was shorter but my shadow was longer.

Jan.31.2022
I read you ten poems, eight-hundred-fifty-
nine lines, I had fourteen coffees, nine creams,
twenty-three bobas. I cried zero times.

Feb.1.2022
Another day went by. Still no feeling.
Why is language the only thing I have?
I wonder if it's possible to live
by persistence, wanting so badly to
remain secured to the body, that his
soul left fourteen years before its vessel.

When asked when a painting was done, Rothko
said, *there's tragedy in every brushstroke.*

Feb.3.2022
A man from the funeral home called me.
His voice was so flat, I took a nap while
he talked. When I woke up, I was in the
casket looking up at the ceiling fan.
I couldn't move my body and a patch
covered my left eye. I heard my own voice
describing my fall onto a knob, how
I lost my left eye, how I refused to
die. And then I saw myself bend over
to look at me. My own hand grabbed my hand
but I couldn't feel it or move my eye.
I saw myself for who I was—evil,
full of syllables. Poets are useless.

Feb.4.2022
Twice now I've thought about the wood casket
and what proportion of the ashes are
wood. Twice now I've read about the chamber,
this time I learn it is called a *retort*,
also a sharp reply. This time, I read
about the *pugilistic stance* when they
burn the body, the boxer-like pose the
body makes. I think about my father,
alone in the retort, in a small box,
two thousand degrees, his legs bent, his fists
ready to punch me and my live flesh.

Feb.6.2022
The cows have spread out and I have counted
fourteen. Their heads always hang down. They don't
seem to need to look up. In that way, they
are unlike us. Our euphoria that
comes directly from despair. *Look up*, we
say, to remind us that we will all die.
Here, the sky is made of nothing. It is

so vast that the twenty-five people who
live here don't have enough sight to change it.

Feb.9.2022
Today they burned my father. A man named
Garrett called me, in his toneless voice, to
say that someone cleaned his body, covered
him in white linen. After the man called,
I felt warmer all day. My body reached
two thousand degrees but would not burn. I
realized I had not thought of my father
more than once in Wyoming. You'd never
know the planet is dying. Here, the clouds
have holes in them and the deer are more etched
with shadow. A sandwich arrives at my
door at noon. I'm so hungry that I eat
the sandwich first, then think of my father.

Feb.10.2022
Today the river is in crisis, no
horizon dares to go near it. Today
my father is in a small jar. At dusk,
I went into a painter's studio,
saw his stretched canvas on the table, white,
empty. What are we without those who made
us? *May his memory be your blessing*,
people emailed me all week. The artist
was painting a series of doors, which were
so real that I walked through the one that was
slightly open. Inside the room was my
breath that I had held since January
13, an eyelid, a loose eyeball, the
knob the eye fell on, the girl's hands that tried
to catch him, which were charred and still waving.

Feb.11.2022
The white truck went from one frame to the next
and I thought of the time when someone lied
about me. How day and night I cared so
much about the lie that it split into

two, one part went out the left window frame,
the other out the right. Like the blue car
that disappears at the same time as the
white one, yet I can see both at once. When
they burned my father's body, I wondered
if the eyeballs spread so far on each side
that they could see Wyoming, these two panes,
me on a small brown chair, looking out the
windows, waiting for oblivion to
travel through with its eighteen wheels and truth.

Feb.12.2022
At the beginning of our family tree
was hope. Or maybe it was just an owl.

Feb.13.2022
The same wind was blowing here eighty years
ago, always snapping families in half.

Feb.14.2022
If I keep the window closed, I am stuck
inside with language as it buzzes back
and forth, trying to get out and start wars.
My sister is the only one left. If
she is the favorite of nothing, then
I must be one of Calvino's cities,
the one with angular shadows, the one
that when turned on its side, becomes a line.

Feb.15.2022
The caskets are shaking. The white-tailed deer
gently cross the river. I hike up the
hill to find my feelings. Instead, I run
into Hope, who doesn't look at me or
stop, but walks down the hill. Today could be
a day where everything is beautiful.

Feb.16.2022
Yesterday, I walked to the small chapel,
head down, yet all the people driving by

waved to me as if they knew what I had
just done, as if they knew I was going
to the chapel. When I got there, fourteen
white-tailed deer stopped and stared, moving away
from me, as if they also knew. Inside, the
cold mixed with the cold from my body and
the moment of mixing, the stained glass, and
my sobbing finally came. It was so
delayed that I wasn't sure if I was
crying for the deer that wouldn't stay, or
the nine people I had just met and would
soon leave behind, the snow that would
come after I am gone, or my father.
I left a note in the guest book, wrote his
name. Above it, *Thomas and Claire Bushnell*,
married the day before my father's death,
a tribute to *Traveler, one of the*
best horses ever. It's time to go home.

Feb.17.2022
Each of us comes from somewhere with blossoms.

Samyak Shertok

A Blessing

After Li-Young Lee

Twice a year Apa cooked his "monk's half-moon" dish: pumpkin blossom
lamb curry—first crackle the fenugreek seeds in ghee, stir the thinly sliced
baby pumpkins translucent, add a concocted paste of wild herbs
soaked in buttermilk overnight, drop the smoked fatted lamb pieces,
pour bone stock, let the fat begin to melt, then spread the flowers whole
on top *until they're dreaming*—but before offering it to us over steamed rice,
even before his gods, he'd serve those who were not home, place the filled
clay bowls on the edge of the smoldering hearth in a half-ring,
always bigger portions than for those politely waiting around him
with clean wet hands, which made me wish I were not there
but forgot all about it as bite after bite dissolved in my mouth,
each mouthful lusher than the last, more ravenous for the next:
salt, cliff-forged flesh, aged smoke, foraged fragrance, rain-honeyed dark,
earthed moonmilk, petrichor pistils, butter gossip of the butterflies, fire
of the fireflies, summer, sweet summer, sweet impossible summer—

Sissy Aqueducts

For Wayne Koestenbaum

Legionnaires loiter on the Via Appia,
Smutty with Visigoth gore & as smug

As frat bros shotgunning Budweisers
With glitter entangled in their pubic hairs'

Michelangelian sprawl. *Ay me*, the sub
Sighs to his dom, deep in his Arendt

Under piney parasols, while the fanfares
Of Respighi mount the skies—the spit

Collects at the corners of the six bucc-
Inators' lips, like dew falling on hyacinths,

Racemes moody by the battered racquet,
Or the Rococo, sperm-candle lambency

Of the Lacedaemonian prince, struck
Dead by a tennis ball, his god-beloved body

Immaculate on a cascade of marmalade
Chiffon. O Tiepolo, miglior fabbro, your

Satanic atlantid is castrated by Apollo's
Hand. A macaw in coral and jade—

Part Aeolian harp, part Aztec whistle skull—
I sing what I see behind the leaves:

In search of a lost Joe Dallesandro scene
Circa *Flesh*, I find only Callas in *Turandot*

Headpiece weeping and sweeping
The cobbles with the hem of her caftan

While Pasolini leads the legionnaires away,
Arm hooked in spray-tanned arm.

And the arches there—pink as Daniel's
Asshole as he awaited the lions

And graffitied with all the vulgarities
Of Pompeii—look barely able to stand,

But the waters they bring are so sweet—
They taste of such distant mountains.

Mary Jo Bang

Science Says

"Annunciation," Orazio Gentileschi, c. 1600–1605

That the walls have no texture suggests that we,
the angels and I, are perfect. And we are,

the way children are until they are no longer.
I remember seeing ground and wondering

where walking might take me. Up or down?
In a landscape of alabaster clouds,

a ball is being rolled out as if it's a future
about to be now, which is odd, because here,

there is no time, it's all the same eternity.
My mother wanted to believe that

my goodness would last and I suppose it has.
I've killed no one. Whenever I was lost,

it was like a daredevil airshow,
the angels and I free-flying at 90 thousand feet.

The Gospel of Mary

"Penitent Magdalene," Domenico Tintoretto, c. 1598

I was living a life that was more
or less filled with misfiring synapses
inside a braincase. They said and said

and never stopped saying, "You are
that problem that can't be undone,
a daughter that keeps becoming

what keeps her mother awake." I was
in that moment mother to myself.
I was living a life filled with sky, gray

to cobalt blue, the robe that wraps
the day and keeps us together as long
as it lasts. I was living inside my head,

looking up, waiting to feel
an awakening but no angel came.
The blue tablet under my tongue

was melting. I was begging the sky
for rapture but all I could see
was a break in the clouds. The only in-

sight I had was what Horace said.
I read it in a book: we are owed
to death, we and whatever is ours.

Madonna of the Chair

"Madonna della Sedia," Raphael, ca. 1513–14

You once sat on straw mats but clearly
it wasn't enough.
It must not have been

since you lifted the mat a few inches
and added pegs at the corners.
You knew how legs worked,

you used them to look for your food.
Was the elevation meant to match
the hierarchy inside your head?

Higher is better as long as
you're the one higher up, is that it?
In the beginning,

I was happy to help. Lean on me,
take a load off, Sally.
I stood by while you added

upholstery, leather even, but electricity?
I said, "No way! Don't make me
or else I'll fuck everything up."

Regan Huff

Mask

It is not that easy.

You do not just open the mouth of the bird
and become the other thing—

the wolf, the bear, the frog that was swallowed,
the human. The human who does not fly,

who cannot without magic travel to the floor of the sea
and speak to the decision-makers among fishes.

The mouths clatter in the night if they are not tied shut.
We are tired of you!
Change into something else!

The human who gets cold in winter.

Sometimes the fish come back in our bodies
in hopes of saying something to us.

I will swallow your arm and change it—
I will swallow your head—

Edwina Attlee

May

from here
I can see a rave and a jingling bell

an early morning settling around the edges
of the car boot sale and the football match
knocking gently at the sides of the exhibition

soap in the bath
apple in the water butt
the church is a boat
nuzzled then blinkered into dock

sorry sorry sorry

John Clare calls May
a happy dirty driving boy
who whistles and cracks the whip
who sings on account of the
season
but here the maidenliest star becomes glassy-
eyed and keyed as a chamber pot
begins to cry

small hands find their way under
and anger lands like layers of fingerprints building up around statements of nationhood and conviction

May
a draped white horse
wearing the banners of foreign beliefs
clopote ca un bufon

The architects gossip like turrets
the towers part the nobility
the sculpted nobles encourage and festoon a community
through the consideration of flags

What would rejection of all this feel like?
A life of determined anti-synchrony
a season for your seasons
a horse with only fur

—

The argument could be made through a reading of the different parts, the leaves the dumb animals, the nobility between the trees and the consent of the stars

beyond the treetops the turrets peek like periscopes

the chimneys let out their song

—

Would it be public life? Watching the procession on May Day and waving at the banners for real real real life. My friends write about what their actions make them remember. Their procession is a pageant for the deaths of sex workers. A float for the racist murder of the women who run the massage parlour. Garlands for the working conditions that underpin everything. Forgive us this standing. Forgive us in strength. Unforgive if forgiving undoes sorrow. Do not unstep your step.

A grey horse a black horse a white horse
a horse made out of caramel. May shears mirth
from gravity time from money the nobles
from their whispering leaves

Mark the poem out in grease collected from the fleece
Shake a foot. Hang a dog's leg. Sweep the banners clean
Adevărata viață adevărată.

Or would it be seasonal time
the gentle rotation of the diorama
and us standing
with our feet in the right position

O-Jeremiah Agbaakin

the root word of babble is babel

Glory of the Latin
of the dead and their grammar
composed entirely of decay.
—Gbenga Adesina, "Glory"

we have many things to teach our dead
but they are all busy sleeping when not
fighting over a plot of graveyard. for in
-stance, the cure for vertigo is to cut off
the head of the task force who still insists
on working despite the fatigue of tongues,
instead of assent or further ascent. they got
it wrong from the start, building toward
one tower, disappointed at their retreating
god, pierced by the winding spires. they
should have erected many towers like we
now do, instead of burning incense smoke
that climbs far lower than the mushroom
clouds that we now grow, seeded from
a nuclear bomb over cities still shivering
from radiation. we aren't blameless neither.
for instance, for every tower that Peachtree
street has sprouted, there are still so many
roaming unhinged, reaching for an imaginary
bough. but we are not here to judge the living
and the dead tongues, but to simply ask why
the two-way mirror is the same as a one-way
mirror; why cleave antagonizes *cleave* in its
slow fracture; why a lover that wants to be *left*
alone is not also asking to be abandoned

Portrait of a Boy on the Other Side of a Glory Hole

Most wounds are circles, so it's no surprise
you'll find me here. Alone. On my knees, on evenings
when the moon hangs low. The brown boy
behind the hole—not quite the size
of a cave or a cigarette burn. Splitting open
my lips the way a saint parts his mouth to banish thirst
or famine or to greet his flock. I have stories
and sadness to share, known men
who moan like injured dogs, others like horses
off to the glue factory. Their dignified shape
reduced by the deep vermilion of my rim.
I used to be scared. Eyes locked to the heavens.
My trembling voice wrapped around their hard-ons.
They only feel me through the hollow space
they briefly occupy. I am all mouth. Cavities and throat.
Obedient. Never see, never touch.
Some call for Jesus as if that were my name.
I have lost so much around here.

Colorete

For your seventh birthday, you asked for a shade
of lipstick so dangerous your mother blessed herself.

It was the color of hell, no, of a tamer kind of Lucifer.
The kind adorning the antagonist's lips on your screen,

painted gingerly on her puckered mouth. Sometimes
pressed against an unmarked postcard, or smudging

the shirt collar of her nemesis's lover, or featured
on the glossy pages of a magazine. You know the kind:

thick with a punch of perfume leaving you hurt
or dazzled with a corked-up migraine for days.

You wanted to be mysterious, praised. Practiced
raising a single eyebrow as you tested out the right tone

on your forearm. Stone-faced and regal. Imagined
the tea parties and fancy invitations coming your way.

Mall-Kiosk-Red. Horror-Movie-Red. Bullet-Hole-Red.
Posing-in-Front-of-the-Mirror-Red, the red of an all-night fire,

of an old suitcase leaving with your father. The red
many say you're still too young for. Even after all these years.

Saint's-Execution-Red. Not the same red of shame shown across
your family's face. No. Runaway-Red. Pick-Up-Truck-Red.

Liquor-Store-Robbery-Red. The red of thousands of vessels coursing
through your body. A red bursting like the language of violence

you know so well. One-Night-Stand-Red. Hate-Crime-Red. A red staining
the tips of your fingers. Mouth-Watering-Red.

Star-Spangled-Banner-Red. Conversion-Therapy-Red.
The red you know will one day suit your lips just right

while getting yourself ready to leave this whole town in ashes.

Wundrkut Forever Ghazal

A turntable scratched-up cento

Where are you now? *Must we say* farewell tonight? *So many of us wonder.*
God sobs in my arms, a wounded gazelle tonight. *They stay for wonder.*

Up in a pot of rice, up from a human zoo. Twisting, sleeping heads of monsters.
Rupture the root. *Route:* all the places we came *to*, we came from *wonder.*

Nights he rocked *shows*, the itch of this tune in his hands. Temples *of boom*,
pyramid of afternoons, carving with his hands. The sweat *he gave for wonder.*

Derecho, emergency. A snap built up in the sound on every panicked highway.
Yesterday, *candy:* salt-water taffy, *tsokolate—the taste of wonder.*

Reading: *setlist* crumpled *in back pocket. Winding* waists, can't forget the glow.
Ellipsis: folding the *harmonies* holding you, *Niki forgave your wonder.*

Knowing what the frame *around* the portrait knows. The medicine hurts,
too. Its honey-smoke *in* the fog that night, the smiling face *of wonder.*

Unmarked crown & *royal.* behind a counter. *mixer.* after school. *skipping*
pantry in your chest. Your *skratches*, consonant. Mistakes? *Raw wonder.*

To be shaped I want, yes, color in my gods. Inventing home
from no words at all & every empty *that carries* the stain *of wonder.*

Forward, elbow! Kiss hands *to vinyl.* Be no one. Be music *surgeon, ghost.*
Be champion. Let none steal, tear down, or gamble away *your wonder.*

On blood, what feeds—let us steady. Household birds *& cats.* Such intimacy,
jungle. *Kaps.* A burning leaf perfumes these needs, *its after-ache of wonder.*

Red & blinking, decades *you crossfade.* In the museum of memory, the missing
songs—chosen, then lost—pursue: *"Yo Deejay!* Accumulate *our wonder!"*

Engines grinding, rotating, smokin'. Gotta bring some glide around.
Inhaling bassline, *ooh wee*, clinging. Brown. *Its every shade of wonder.*

Visit to where the name is known toward the earth, & heaven
bows down in love without end, the dust there *made of wonder.*

Exist, what if I do? In a few flashes in my *beloveds'* eyes. Longing & restless,
I know the jugglery of the world's hubbub—*its constant splay of wonder.*

Rifted, Hari, precipice in solar plexus? Can't go on alone? Reach out. You're held.
It's an amulet. I think of Silver, put on Kaya's playlist. & I pray for wonder.

(Rest. Chew on the thread of silence. Dip in Inkwater *before you slip it thru the needle's only eye. Team Danger.* Life, kiss *forever. Eric's way: of Wundr.)*

Except for the italics, this poem is gathered, gratefully, from samples and interpolations of fifteen ghazals and three songs, by (in order of appearance): Agha Shahid Ali; Danni Quintos; Maria Bolaños; John Murillo; Luisa A. Igloria; Aimee Nezhukumatathil; Purple Hearts Social Club; Angel Nafis; Jamila Woods; Edil Hassan; Gunnar Ekelöf, tr. by Rika Lesser; Tarfia Faizullah; Zeina Hashem Beck; Patricia Smith ("ooh wee" italicized in original); Ghalib, tr. by Aijaz Ahmad and W.S. Merwin; Jigar Moradabadi; DJ Wundrkut; and Sade.

The Part That's Left for You

I

You won't find what you're seeking here,
a beginning in which salt emerges as the bridge
between the Sky and Sea. I'm sorry you can't have

an origin that holds you. The serpent in the ocean
who chases seven moons into eclipse,
the one whom gods and demons grip

to churn, to churn—nectar, poison into being:
your blood can't simply connect these stories
so the deity of loss becomes origin to salt.

II

(Somehow this will still begin with salt.) The earth will not
belong to how you hold the earth. The bird in the story
may never alight where your homies visioned, combining

three birds you are from. This illegitimate salvage
brings no augur to save you at the crossroads, no.
You're wrong again. You're faltering. The signs

are all around: sun, moon, stars, and land,
a failed attempt to overthrow—and more to give. This
is only partial, another displaced version. Like you, it's incomplete.

III

And, in every moment: whole. You're from
mistakes, my dearest—the failure of Gods to love the world
They made. Not only, but still: a world begun in war,

which is to say, in mourning (before this story separated them
Sky and Sea would touch). Here is the land, who led the rise
and fell. Here, the stars, the moon and sun: their raised-up

light, what the Gods had to settle for. After the Sea
convinced the Sky to try: Their own brightest failure—
it's up to you, my loves—to restore the dead to life.

Prompted by a conversation with Keana Aguila Labra and Maria Bolaños, in relation to a collaboration with visual art by Julay.

Romer's Gap

A gap in the evolutionary fossil record; relevant fossils from this time have not yet been discovered.

—supratidal—

draw back—
fear of grief.
disdain toward
desired thing.

—tsunami:
fly agaric.
herbalist porn fantasy.
vivisection.
simultaneous orgasm atop lab table.

anthropomorphize trees to avoid
homoerotic thoughts of family members.
homoeroticize anthropomorphic trees.

suppress memory.
unsuppress memory.
suppress memory.
watch deep-sea snailfish implode

upon forced surfacing—
withdraw permission.

—intertidal—

google medieval torture boxes.
google eradication of female
genitalia without mutilation.

carve orifice out of fruit.
toy with idea of sharing.
in sunlight, anemones

ball their fists.
write text.
delete text.
note several ways to hide.

—subtidal—

edit bubonic plague wikipedia page.
through window, cormorants
arrow into the sea.

for once,
careen.

in the aphotic zone, creatures must conjure
their own light.
the plague was about transformation
in the face of—
wikipedia account banned indefinitely.

unearth childhood list of desired objects:
nautilus
cicada husk
tender zing of

freshly toothless hole—
permission granted:

emerge immune
to rapture.

Flung Vase

I recall laughter
the moment he threw it.
The vase was pressed crystal
and not of any value,

from somewhere off the Danube.

Cut flowers wilt.
Cut flowers will
always be an industry of death
to me. Holland

is Europe's largest exporter.

Here, across the border,
one can buy a dozen roses
for 4 Euros. They come denuded
of thorns.

Come to think of it,

how tedious to saw
through, say, a sunflower's
stalk,
or to slap back,

which was a blessing of sorts.

Mother and Daughter at the Grand Hotel, Locarno, Switzerland

I write about you all the time, I said aloud.
Every time I say "I," it refers to you.
—Louise Glück, "Visitors from Abroad"

My daughter's cellphone works
only on the veranda. A metronome

pulses the hours. Boats comb the lake. The Alps
multiply, the nurse calls to say

she's on her way, or something upbeat.
Late nights in the pink attic

I hemmed my first pantsuit. A needle
here, a tuck there. Now my daughter

leans on an urn in a linen skirt.
Pillows succumb to arias.

A nurse appears, or has been here all along:
Sta comodo, Signora?

How comfortable can I be, minus T cells?
I kept her addresses in pencil,

memorized her boyfriends' names, clipped
butterflies in her hair before she boarded

the plane. The bone breadth of marrow.
I left because the avenue was long.

Use the right lung today, Madam.
The windows are flung open.

Down the hall, visitors sip Prosecco.
Chin-chin, they chime.

Mamaw grew beefsteak tomatoes
in the back garden, cut them

into flowers laced with salt. Pulped
the fruit and spiked the juice

to gulp from Bohemian glass. Summers so hot
the porch rail burned our thighs

as boys licked sweat from our chins.
Magnolia petals dropped like eyelids.

Now I hallucinate beneath colonnades.
I used to study late, letting myself sleep

only after I looked up the same word twice.
Counting cigarettes, counting pages.

Now my body is a rag doll as my daughter rubs
baby oil on my heels

and paints my toenails. *Waste of time*, I tease.
Hold still, Mom. She waves a tiny bottle

of magenta as if it were a vial of poison:
It's called Plumberry. Look, it's beautiful.

She holds the polish up to the Italian light.
The living find it so easy to be satisfied.

She has my cheekbones, at least.
Someone offers us rose hip tea.

I thank him, but say I prefer whiskey.
My daughter answers another call.

She floats onto the veranda,
a sail between mountains.

The lake confesses in silver mirrors.
As a baby, my daughter nestled

in the lemon spoon of me. I was a nurse, after all.
Now she is all chill and translation

to my logarithm of charts and cells.
I tell her why I left.

She seems to take this, too, as reportage
that she types into her phone.

Tulips arrive by crate at the dock.
Shadows of buttered corn tickle the nose.

I ask my daughter what is on my forehead.
It's my hand, she replies.

Oh, you mean your palm? I ask, she being the poet.
Okay then, she says. *Call it my palm.*

Sarah M. Sala

Migraine as Whale: A Triptych

I

Your wusband and some locals charter a whale-watching
tour in the North Pacific Ocean. The surf is huge—
rough weather moving in tomorrow.

The boat carves celadon waves into midnight navy depths.
All day you scan the horizon for humpback whales until
the captain cuts the engine.

Surface tension gives way to a whale's bumpy tubercles,
her tuxedo shirt throat grooves, you're met with her
distrustful orbiting eye. Something shifts in you.

After the catamaran pitches back to harbor, the other
parties disembark. But the horizon continues to lurch
like the unsteady hull of a ship.

Except now, it's the walls of the apartment. The kitchen
stove, the pendant lights, even the blankets insist on this
heaving motion. Everywhere you sight land, the ocean's
undulation echoes.

As best you can, you surrender to the waves. *I am a boat,*
you say. *I am a wave. I am a whale. I am a whale's iris.*

But you awaken to brain coral for a skull. Ocean tackle
lacerates your bottom lip. Trawling nets sink your quads.
Wherever you go, your pant legs pour sand.

You've already missed so much work, you drift to the
subway. Today you're slated to present your research
to the department chair.

When you confess your new body to a colleague
at the elevator bank, she says, *but you don't look sick.*

II

Your wusband and some locals charter a whale **watching** tour in the North Pacific Ocean. The surf is huge—rough weather moving in tomorrow.

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When you **c**onfess your new body to a colleague at the elevator bank, she says, *but you don't look sick.*

III

a whale
huge—
moving
into midnight
her throat grooves,
other
parties
. Everywhere you
go,
You miss
your body

Eileen G'Sell

Topless Modeling on New Year's Eve

Never underestimate the cage
of your body. The stage of skin
in which glitter abrades. This bright

and humble, ravenous hour
that feathers seconds, firsts, with praise.
There's famine enough for both

of us, if anybody's counting.
Freedom, Fritos, a psalm for silk.
Never underestimate the age

of exhaustion, the flight of stares
en route to the end. "Off
with their heads," a Red Queen says

to yet another Diamond. Do you
love what you've become? Have you
found someone who can?

The Last Lophodytes

My love loves hooded mergansers, absurd
dives into wry arcana. He sees farther than I can
fake and fakes nothing within my gaze.

Vagrants in the wetland, we forest for
the modern. We ebb and flow the winter, forbid
the easy estuaries. So what if a day

in the life of the mind evolves in brackish waters?
A joke about an overrated film, a scoop
of lime moqueca, the sloppy second

before God opts to starve the shore of starlight?
Take it. Take me. This empty beach, endangered
sun, the hungry gulls, all ours.

Jim Daniels

Tunnel to Canada

The Detroit–Windsor tunnel connects the cities of Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario, Canada. It is the second-busiest crossing between the United States and Canada, the first being the Ambassador Bridge, which also connects the two cities, which are situated on the Detroit River.

"I seem to recall a dumbass teen that stuck his head out of the car in the Windsor/Detroit tunnel and got decapitated on a pillar."

I looked forward to crossing the Ambassador Bridge
but ended up in the Tunnel to Canada
that has no grand name or view.

An old girlfriend from out of state
thought Tunnel to Canada was the name
of a downtown restaurant.

I emerged into the light to answer questions
at the border after accidentally drifting
into the frequent flyer lane.

My life has been a series of gentle decapitations
and yet another curious head pops up again
in suspicious wonder at survival.

Out of the darkness into the light
and already angry men asking questions
about changing lanes. O, Canada,
I hum in my own anxious tunnel.

They have been so nice to me in Canada.
I want to end every sentence I write with Canada.

I have burned many inelegant bridges.
Nothing like the bridges
to Canada. I want to end every sentence with bridges.

I misspelled inelegant so that it looks like intelligent.
I have also burned many intelligent
bridges with my Stupidity Matches—
waterproof, strike-anywhere matches.

I want to end every sentence with matches.
Don't play with matches.
I never lit a tennis match.
I never played a match

made in heaven.
I want to end every sentence with heaven.

I had a good meal at Tunnel to Canada.
It's a nude restaurant, but the novelty
has worn off. Clothes are back.
The lights are back
on. It's turning into a dark restaurant.

The meal was all potato chips
and poker chips.
A special at the casino.

It is hard to end many lines with casino
given that Windsor only has one.
Finally, Detroit legalized casinos
to compete with Windsor's casinos.

Though for many years I was a dumbass
teen, I was never beheaded and continued as a dumbass
in my twenties.

They finally let me go through customs
at the end of the tunnel without even searching
me. Me, I am still searching.

Jesus on the Iron Cross

An iron cross is a gymnastics skill on the rings in which the body is suspended upright while extending the arms laterally, forming the shape of the Christian cross. It requires significant core, arm, and wrist strength.

The strongest boy in our high school
on the edge of Detroit did not play
sports—he would've had to cut
his long blond Samson hair
and put away his switchblade
and stop smoking dope.

The gone-to-seed coaches who taught
gym class hated him for the beauty
they could not have, harness—
unable to wipe away his grin
with endless push-ups.
He was the only one

who could do the iron cross
when we did gymnastics.
We watched his arms tremble
above us as he held the position,
worshipping at the temple
of the damned. The teachers

stood, hands on hips, teaching
us nothing, as they always did.
I was not literate enough to read
their faces as they cursed prayers
under their breath standing
beside us as he held the cross

until he could no longer
and fell to the mats
and we moved on to the rope,
to the trampoline or peg board,
as if nothing had happened, lined
up in identical blue gym shorts

and white Fitzgerald High t-shirts
with our last names scrawled
in the blue center squares.
I didn't need that kind of literacy—
I had faith he could rise from the dead
whenever he felt like it.

Ahmad Almallah

Some Things Last

These windows, these panes, at the beginning of light
looking where they look, eyeing the east and the rust
and here they are, protected by shade and shadows:
branches and birds strike them, fly into them and out.
You can see nothing through them, you can only see what
bounces off: back at the world and then you return,
to the lemon, that is the self, squeezing drop after drop—
there's nothing left of you now, no juice! Can you go on
lubricating the mind, musing on you as disaster,
and the rest of you as the elements?
Here, they go one by one
into a flame set down, beneath all the steps, at the very
bottom of it all … and God! The eyes wish you didn't!
They look away from the blank space remaining—oh these
birds in the mornings are funny and the little tricks they
repeat and repeat, like these sounds they make, in order:
they fly off together or one by one, puffing up their small
bodies, extending a peak that opens up a view, that finds
space in whatever looks shut and closed—a wall has
some hole, a tree trunk can manage a crack, and under
the ledge, a window knows something
of the hidden world.

Reprinted from *Border Wisdom* (Winter Editions, 2023).

The Sky Keeps Surprises

the wound is bleeding into white
the wound is threading clouds
across the eye, across its view
        and how can it be
                that I am

caught
        by the end of this road
by the beginning of a faraway
flame
        off guard
                I find my steps

going back and forth on pavement
in the middle of the street
                a follower
of clouds
        a sort of
                clown

does anybody see?

        against this view, why
do I feel
        myself
        invisible and invincible
a leaking thing at times
        there among the buildings
and windows
        all above my head
        I could be seen
a fool
        and
                I am I am.

Reprinted from *Border Wisdom* (Winter Editions, 2023).

COMMENT

What if one posits a lineage that begins with Brooks? That's what Hayes has done here, and it's a big deal.

Craig Morgan Teicher

Craig Morgan Teicher

Omit the Gate: On "Watch Your Language" by Terrance Hayes

Early in *Watch Your Language*, his new book about poetry, Terrance Hayes asks a question that thunders for me now as I think about it: "Where does Gwendolyn Brooks go in Modern American poetry?" Brooks was, of course, a major mid-century poet, born the same year as Robert Lowell, and the first Black person to win the Pulitzer Prize, in 1950 for *Annie Allen*, her second collection of poems. If you click over to her page on the Pulitzer site, you'll see there is a rather remarkable write-up there, which quotes a letter from Henry Seidel Canby, a Yale professor who served as one of the judges. In the letter, he explains how the committee, which also included poet and editor Alfred Kreymborg and anthologizer extraordinaire Louis Untermeyer, decided to award the prize to Brooks. She was up against stiff competition: "The finest book of poetry this year is very naturally the *Complete Poems* of Robert Frost," writes Canby. He quotes Untermeyer to explain why Frost is nonetheless a poor choice:

> Frost has received the award four times ... and, with the exception of a few added titles, for the same poems! A further "honor" to Frost would be not only superfluous but so repetitious as to seem silly. In addition, an award to Frost would be a confession that current poetry is so lifeless that we have to turn again to the one poet we can cite as a contemporary tradition.

There was also the selected poems of William Carlos Williams to consider, but Williams, Canby continues, "lacks self-criticism, and his total output so far is frequently distinguished by an extreme of obscurity." Fortunately, there was another exceptional poet, one Canby called "a Negro writer of unusual ability," whose *Annie Allen* is, "in our opinion, the outstanding volume of the year, if you exclude Robert Frost."

No matter how generously you want to read that comment (they *did* give her the prize, and I believe their enthusiasm for *Annie Allen* was genuine), it's steeped in racism. I find it hard not to hear the implication that the committee felt Brooks possessed "unusual ability" *for* a "Negro writer," and that *Annie Allen* only rises to the top if you omit the top-seeded white men. The gatekeepers were willing, given the unusual circumstance of Frost's many previous Pulitzers and Williams's "extreme ... obscurity," to let Brooks squeak through the gate—evidence, as if more was needed, that the American poetry establishment reflected the racism encoded everywhere in mid-century America: exclusionary, bigoted, and self-serving. Until fairly recently, the keepers kept the gate mostly locked in this manner.

Despite the reluctant offer of admission, from the early stages of her career Brooks *went* with some of the most firmly canonized white poets of her era. Thinking about Brooks beside Frost and Williams is illuminating. Like both of them, Brooks was deeply invested in vernacular speech as material for poetry; for Brooks, it was the speech of Black Americans that most interested her. Like Frost, she was a devout formalist, and like Williams, she was perennially interested in stretching those forms beyond their established limits, in seeing what they could be made to say and do in the context of Black American experience in the pressurized middle of the twentieth century. Obviously, she wasn't the first or only poet to do this (Langston Hughes was a half-generation ahead and Robert Hayden was a peer), but she was perhaps the best and most thoroughly contemporary, the poet who most profoundly angled the tradition of English-language poetry away from white experience and toward the Black lives that are central to America and its culture. Where does Brooks *go*? At the *very center* of the conversation about American poetry. This should be an established fact, and in many quarters it is, and yet, here is Hayes, one of our best contemporary poets, and an obvious inheritor of Brooks's legacy, still wondering why Brooks hasn't gotten her canonical due, still committed to putting her in her proper place: "Why don't more critics write about Brooks?" Hayes asks a couple of paragraphs later.

In part, Hayes is asking questions about categorization: What kind of poet is Brooks? In relation to which other poets can we understand her work? Hayes is also asking himself a question: where does *he* fit Brooks into his own story of how poetry happened *for him*? This is a favorite topic among poets—what's my conversion story? Why did I devote myself to this art form, which is so much about ambiguity and uncertainty, which, like a mirror, demands self-scrutiny, and which, at least until recently, was a rather obscure and nerdy preoccupation? Hayes's book constitutes an extended answer to these questions and an assertion of a new model of gatekeeping in which the gate is kept open.

Watch Your Language is, first, a book about discovering poetry, and a handbook for loving poetry. It follows Hayes's remarkable *To Float in the Space Between: A Life and Work in Conversation with the Life and Work of Etheridge Knight*, an utterly original critical and biographical study that is also an account of Hayes's life in terms of the influence Knight has exerted on it. Knight ties back to Brooks, too—"She would be essential to the American literary canon even if all she did was get Etheridge Knight writing poems in prison," Hayes writes in the new book. *To Float in the Space Between* is a prototype for *Watch Your Language*: it combines critical and personal essays to create an enveloping portrait of Knight and his work. It's a joyful vision of what literary criticism can be: whimsical, lyrical, personal, confrontational, fun, and funny. In addition to many close readings of Knight's poems and anecdotes about the poet, *To Float in the Space Between* contains a long memoir as well as drawings, poems in imitation of and response to Knight,

and other uncategorizable writings. One comes away from the book knowing as much about Hayes as about Knight and in possession of something more ephemeral: a sense of *why* one should read Knight, of what one might go looking for in his poems, and what one might find. *To Float in the Space Between* made me an instant Knight devotee. *Watch Your Language* applies this method to many more poets and extends its effect to a wider audience.

More than other literary genres, poetry demands a special kind of reading, a willingness to suspend one's immediate need for comprehension. It demands a kind of faith, and the best craft books work like spiritual texts, when read alongside the poetry itself, of course. Craft books try to make the geeky, insider conversation about this esoteric art form available at any time to anyone. Teenagers and students read them as they enter into the murky atmosphere that hangs around poems; I did. Poets and readers read them to recharge, to rekindle a sleepy poetry habit, or, sometimes, to urgently seek a path to the truth, and voices that share their urgency. One reads a book like Hayes's to feel at home in a strange land, to feel one's enthusiasm answered and challenged, to soothe one's uncertainty, and to excite it, in order to get more *into* poetry.

I can't think of a poet from whom I would rather read a craft book than Hayes. Why? Because of where *he* goes in modern American poetry. Critics love to make pronouncements, so indulge me in one that will not cause controversy but is worth stating plainly anyhow: Hayes is one of our major poets, one with whom today's poets must reckon as they forge their own sensibilities. He was one of the first poets of his generation to be decorated with American literature's major honors: he was awarded a National Book Award when he was thirty-nine, around the publication of his breakout book *Lighthead*, and a MacArthur Fellowship in 2014 when he was forty-three. His 2018 collection, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, is one of the signal poetry books of the Trump era and of the poetic outcry over the police killings of young Black men. It also may have kicked off a sonnet craze. From his position of prominence, Hayes has taken on the role of critic and popularizer of today's major poets.

Take in this remarkable statistic: Hayes writes substantially about thirty-four poets in *Watch Your Language* and only a handful of them are white. This is a different tradition, a different canon from the one I was taught twenty-five years ago, and probably from the one still being taught in many of today's classrooms. Or it's the tradition that was always there, repressed beneath the dominant one. Why haven't more critics written about Brooks? Racism is one obvious answer, amplified by the self-perpetuating cycle of critics—and craft book authors—omitting her from their considerations. Brooks "often goes unacknowledged the way caretakers and angels go unacknowledged," Hayes writes. "Pulitzer or not, her attention to interior spaces—to Black interior spaces—meant her work would be overlooked by her contemporaries at every age." But what if one posits a

lineage that begins with Brooks? That's what Hayes has done here, and it's a big deal.

Hayes props open the gate by making this book *fun*, filled not only with literary essays but drawings, aphoristic quizzes, and tributes to poets that take surprising forms, including "AA All Star Poet" trading cards (each of which features a drawing and a brief impressionistic profile of a poet) and instructions for a board game in which one's avatar is the poet Tim Seibles. There's a script for an unboxing video featuring the selected poems of Yusef Komunyakaa and a mystery story about a missing manuscript by the beloved late poet Brigit Pegeen Kelly. The book feels electric, slightly out of its own control. The drawings, which are highly energetic if sometimes a bit weird, make the book feel homemade, personal, in-process. Its central proposition is that poetry is joyful, odd, and specific to the lives and eccentricities of its makers. *Watch Your Language* is, I think, the first craft book to be addressed to poetry's internet-era readers; we expect a bit more noise.

The contemporary poet Toi Derricotte, cofounder of Cave Canem, the seminal writing workshop organized to mentor Black poets, is another of the "caretakers and angels" that Hayes is determined will not go unacknowledged. "My Gwendolyn Brooks" is actually addressed to her:

> Toi, I'd given a considerable amount of thinking to the brilliant life of Gwendolyn Brooks before it occurred to me you have been my own personal Gwendolyn Brooks for the entirety of my life. You both are evidence that the secret to longevity is living a poetic life. I have had all the good fortune of a student who had never been without his best teacher.

Despite its many forms of institutionalized instruction, from MFA programs to private manuscript consultations with renowned poet-editors, poetry is still largely an oral tradition, by which I mean that it is passed down by hand from one poet to another.

Hayes keeps coming back to Derricotte, just as he keeps coming back to Brooks, his taproots and self-renewing sources of inspiration. His "AA All Star Poet" card for Derricotte is one of the warmest and most effective of these page-long evocations and tributes:

> Here are some of Derricotte's gifts to people who live by poems: An openness found nowhere else in American poetry. except maybe in the way Jean Toomer describes flowers in a storm. A humor that can be wired as John Berryman's *Dream Songs* or weird as Bob Kaufman's sardines. A daughter of undertaker & overseer, of Duke & Lady Day, of Brooks & Hayden; a niece to Lorde & Clifton; a sister to Eady & Olds; queen of the evening mothering us Black orphan poets.

Look at how definitively and concisely Hayes locates Derricotte in his tradition, stretching from the origin points of Brooks and Hayden, onto jazz legends Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday, through Lucille Clifton and Sharon Olds and onto newer poets. Think of all the books this tiny passage suggests. This is how poetry really works—it's not powered by a bunch of scholars in PhD programs trying to wring drops of new insight out of old, dry sonnets. Poetry moves more like gossip, on tides of enthusiasm and memory, on gratitude and ambassadorship. The real canon is made in conversation.

This book is messy, but it works. It's a miscellany. I suspect some of these pieces were written specifically for the book, but various prefaces, introductions, and talks are spread throughout, including introductions for retrospective collections by Amiri Baraka and Wanda Coleman, as well as an introduction to a reading by Cornelius Eady. Some of these pieces, such as an utterly stirring consideration of James Baldwin that served as a welcome speech to a Cave Canem conference, feel like they have found the perfect home, drawing the reader back toward the experience of when the talk was first delivered. Other pieces, like the Baraka introduction, feel dropped in, like filler. They could've used a bit of editing and some smoothing out of the seams between them and the rest of the book. Except there's something meaningful in this looseness—I think Hayes wants this book to seem like something anyone could make. Why not throw in everything that counts? Why hide the seams when it is the stitching that Hayes is trying to show? He loads the book with grainy facsimiles of his notebook pages, many of them barely legible. You can put your whole self into this, Hayes seems to say, even the parts that don't look like they fit together, the parts that don't fit with whatever one may associate with the word *poetry*. Poetry is personal because, despite the mountains of criticism that you can read about it, you must always experience poems alone, even if you're hearing them out loud at an event. It's always the meeting of the poet's vocabulary with your own inside the secret crucible of your head. It's weird and hard to describe and the opposite of television, where everyone is meant to think and feel the same thing at the same time.

I wonder whether—and I sincerely hope that—this book will be huge with high schoolers, or at least poetry-huge, which is a smaller sort of huge. I get giddy imagining the view if this were the first panoramic glimpse teenagers got of the poetry landscape. My first poets were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Roethke, William Carlos Williams (especially), Lucille Clifton, Dylan Thomas, and Seamus Heaney, plus *a lot* of Charles Bukowski and Allen Ginsberg. These were the poets my teachers showed me, plus a couple I found on my own while lurking around my local Barnes & Noble in the evenings after school so as not to have to be at home. They were wonderful poets—they got me through, they got me excited. I wanted to *become* them, and in many ways I did—here I am filling pages in one of their magazines, a functional adult who sprouted from the depressive teen poetry rescued.

But no matter how you slice or explain or justify the poets I read when I was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, the years when I needed poetry most urgently, they formed an elitist vision of what poetry could be. They were mostly white, mostly men, mostly straight, mostly old; they seemed to have always been old. Old seemed to be a qualification for poetry, as though a young poet's first goal should be to hurry up and get less young. I'm eternally grateful for these poets and for the teachers who put their poems in front of me—they showed me so much that I needed to see, but they mostly didn't show me the real world, and they mostly didn't show me the America I was living in.

Imagine if I had had *Watch Your Language* then. I could have found Gwendolyn Brooks years earlier, her subversive formalism and unerring eye; I could have gotten ear-training from Komunyakaa. What if Hayes had told me about Reginald Shepherd or Lynda Hull or Patricia Smith then? What if, alongside Hayes, I could have imagined, at fifteen, that poetry is something you might base a board game on? "There are no restrictions on how you may interpret the words" is one of Hayes's rules to "The Tim Seibles Bookbioboardgame."

But I also need to pause here to acknowledge that some of this book's most direct gazes are not directed at me. I'm white, and poetry has always presented me with plenty of pathways. That's not to say this book *isn't* for me—I think it very much is—but a sweeping survey of poetry not rooted in whiteness is long overdue for so many readers. Starting with Brooks, Hayes shows us the whole twentieth century—you can see it from here, even without an "AA All Star Poet" card for Elizabeth Bishop. I don't think there's ever been a book like this before. A young Black poet reading this book will see the poetic tradition—the past, as well as the present—as it really is, not one tradition at all, but many, carried forward by many kinds of people who are connected not just by scholars' analyses, but by community. They will see that there are places like Cave Canem to visit, living poets like Sonia Sanchez and Afaa Michael Weaver to meet. They will see that, yes, some imperative part of their apprenticeship must be undertaken alone, in the wee hours, curled behind a book or notebook, but that another part of it, maybe the most important part, takes place among other poets who are young and old and middle-aged, funny and earnest and experimental and traditional. They will feel *invited* to poetry, and by no less a host than Terrance Hayes, one of the best and most important poets now writing. "Any book that matters to a reader is literature," writes Hayes in his preface. The gate is flung open. Imagine if *that* was your introduction to poetry.

NOT TOO HARD TO MASTER

"Not Too Hard to Master" is an essay series of poets writing on form and sharing a prompt. This is the fifth essay in the series.

Super Bubble 1 (*after Mallarmé*), 2016. All photographs by Robert Fernandez.

Robert Fernandez

Fire, Paint, Pastels | Stones, Fans, Gum

ON WRITING WITH NONTRADITIONAL MEDIA AND SUPPORTS

Sometime in 2016, a box of gas station Super Bubble chewing gum caught my eye. I had recently published *Azure*, my cotranslation of Stéphane Mallarmé with Blake Bronson-Bartlett, and while working on that project I learned that Mallarmé wrote poems on nontraditional supports like stones and fans; when I saw the gum, I thought, *Why not?* and bought the entire box.

I landed on a formal constraint of four words per piece of gum, two with the same color ink and two with different colors than the first two and each other (altogether red, brown, and black). I streaked the backs of each with a black Posca marker to ensure the viewer could easily differentiate between the written-on and blank sides, arranged them in various configurations on a white sheet of paper, and photographed the variations.

Several reading possibilities emerged. For example, one could read the pieces of gum as they appear in the image itself, allowing the image to be the poem (or poems), like in the image facing this page. Or one could transcribe each piece of gum as its own poem: "worm takes pink drink"; "woofers smiling crowding sun"; "tiger gums toughen up." Or transcribe a specific ink or combinations of inks in individual images or across the entire series ("worm takes crowding tiger gums"). And so on.

After working with the gum, I kept at this mode of writing, moving on to artist notebooks and pastels, which defamiliarized my writing hand because they were often thicker, stubbier, more uncomfortable, and dirtier than a pencil. I became more attuned to the idiosyncrasies of my handwriting and the densities and acoustics of different pastels, and to their textures, colors, potentials for smudges, dust effects, and so forth. I could only write out characters comfortably and legibly at a larger size, which shortened my line lengths and made it so that I sometimes had to break words apart, opening possibilities for foregrounding embedded words and effects like the spininess of hyphens at the ends of lines. I largely composed on the spot. Not having endless sheets of paper or an open document to work with necessitated developing new techniques—among them rhyme, homophones, repetition, transitions, images, references, and tonal variations like humor—for maneuvering through finite spaces. The logic of these new approaches eventually took root in my nonvisual poetic compositions. It changed my language—or helped me access a new language.

I had been writing poems with a pencil, pen, and word processor since I was a kid but began to use different media and supports to see what was possible in line with an intrepid forebearer, Mallarmé, and in the spirit of poets like William Blake, Louis Zukofsky, Josely Vianna Baptista, and

Jean-Michel Basquiat—poets who in their respective ways interrogate the glyphic, spatial, transtemporal, aerated, juicy, object- and image-based potentials of the poem. In addition to a new language, I acquired a new practice: visual art.

My work with nontraditional media and supports culminated in an art book, *Grand Grimoire*, completed in 2016. *culebras* [snakes] is a series in *Grand Grimoire* that was made using pastels, pencil, spray paint, and fireworks on paper in a 12.5-by-10.75-inch sketchbook. The poem's text, which is written throughout *culebras*, includes words from Emily Dickinson's "A narrow Fellow in the Grass (1096)," D.H. Lawrence's "Snake," and Theodore Roethke's "Snake." I have chosen to normalize the poem's layout and not incorporate the post-fireworks changes (e.g., lacunae); elsewhere in *Grand Grimoire* and other work, I transcribe the poem's distinct layout and physical changes. The first image is a title page—the word *culebras* in pastels with some smiling cobra eyes drawn through the hood-like loops of my handwriting/drawing. I photographed the fireworks' aftermath in every image but the last, *culebras 6* (*thrice adream | smeared laughter*), which captures them igniting and where you can see some of the Pharaoh's serpent, aka Black Snake firework pellets, scattered across the page.

What helped me persist through early doubts was the sheer pleasure of engaging with the materials—an embodied, erotic response, to use Audre Lorde's word, to the cool, flat sides of the pastels, the thickness of the paper, the sound and smell of drips of paint. I had no clue where it was going, but it was fun.

CULEBRAS

landowner | priest

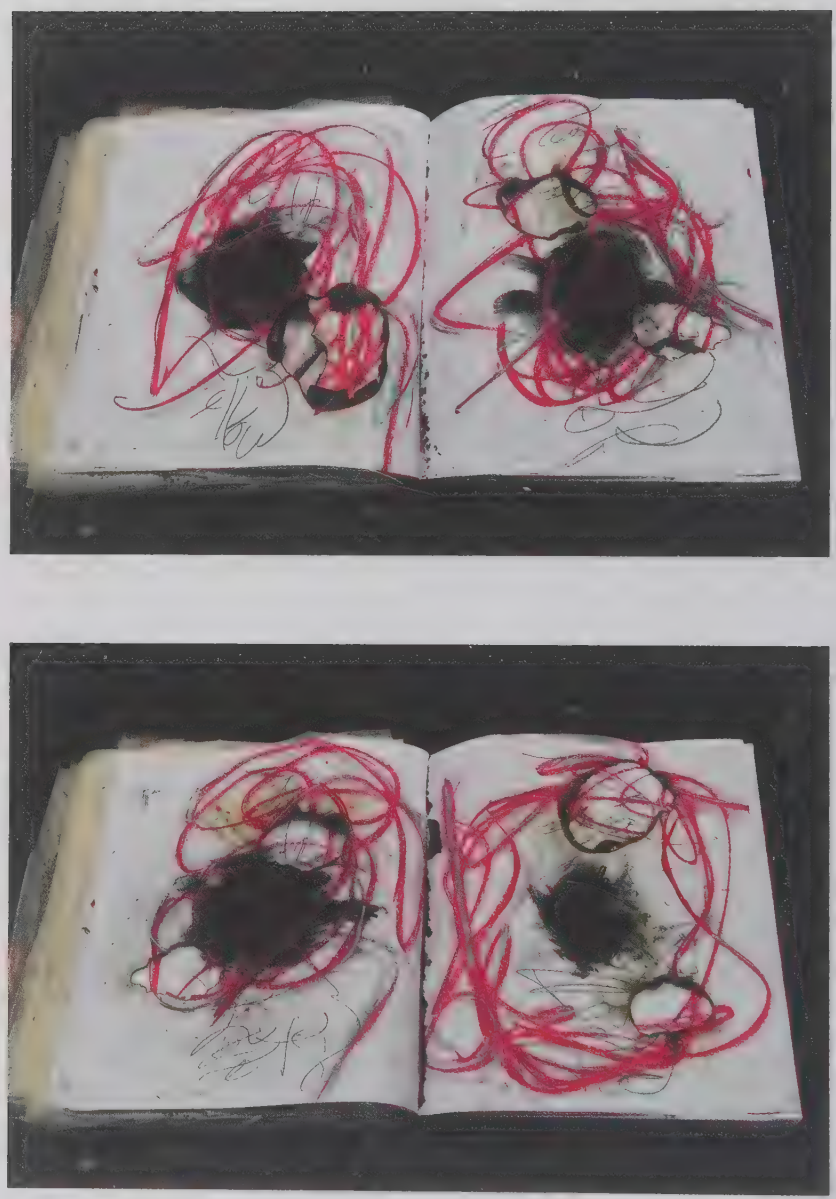
little fellow | garden mop

gardenia sheets | folded in pasta

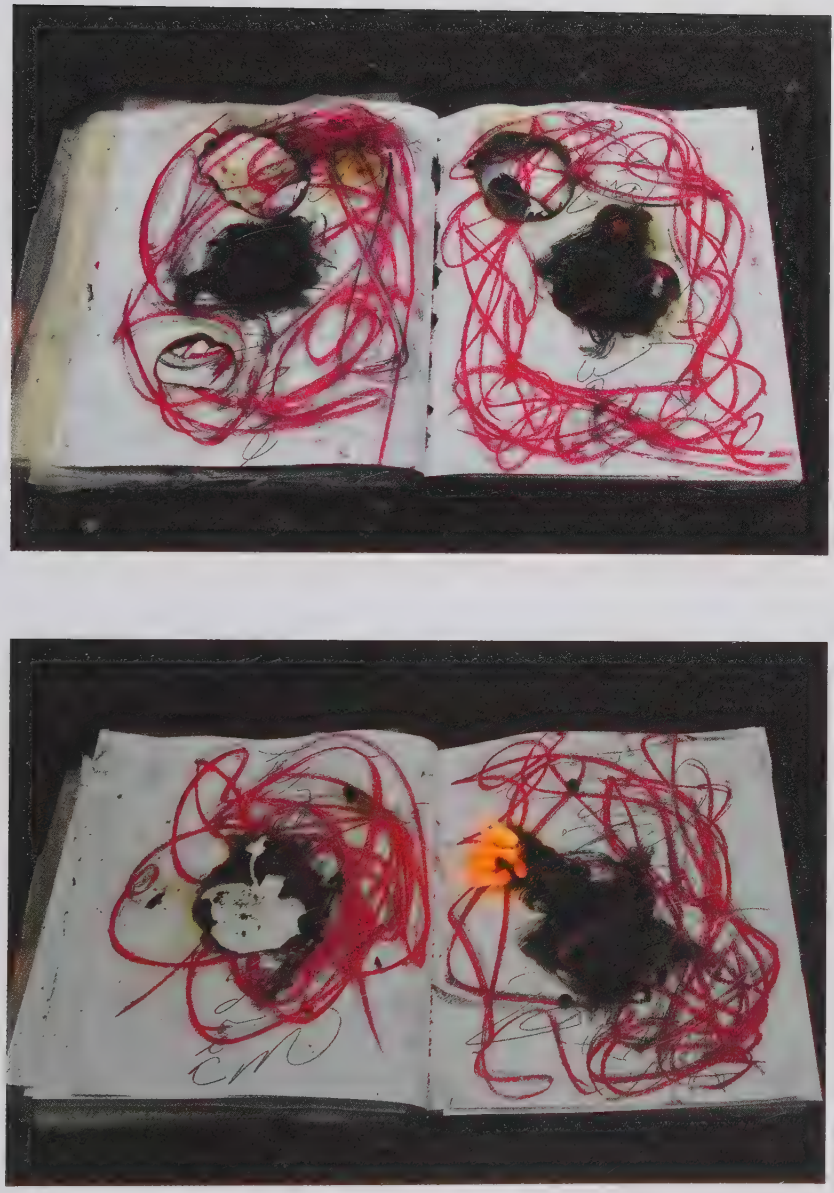
mottled shade | splashing in water

thrice adream | smeared laughter

culebras 1 (*Title Page*) and *culebras 2* (*landowner | priest*), 2016.



culebras 3 (*little fellow | garden mop*) and *culebras 4* (*gardenia sheets | folded in pasta*), 2016.



culebras 5 (*mottled shade | splashing in water*) and *culebras 6* (*thrice adream | smeared laughter*), 2016.

Writing Prompt

If you're feeling weighed down by language and the page, try the following:

1. Choose your medium and support. For *Super Bubble 1* (*after Mallarmé*), I chose different-colored pens and a black Posca marker as my media and gum as my support. Mallarmé chose ink as a medium and stones, fans, Easter eggs, and jugs as supports. I recommend anything that seems fun and easy to come by.

2. Do some test runs to see how your medium and support interact.

3. Start to write.

I hope the visceral joy of the activity will allow you to think in ever-deepening and illuminating alignments with the materials themselves. Questions to consider: How will you (if you will) preserve the poem? Will it stay a singular work or be photographed, transcribed, etcetera?

Contributors

O-Jeremiah Agbaakin* is the author of *The Sign of the Ram* (Akashic Books, 2023). He lives in Athens, Georgia, where he is a doctoral student at the University of Georgia.

Humberto Ak'abal* (1952–2019) was a K'iche' Maya poet from Guatemala. His book *Guardián de la caída de agua (Guardian of the Waterfall)*, published by Serviprensa Centroamericana, was named book of the year by Association of Guatemalan Journalists and received their Golden Quetzal award in 1993. In 2004, he declined to receive the Guatemala National Prize in Literature because it is named for Miguel Ángel Asturias, whom Ak'abal accused of encouraging racism.

Hari Alluri is author of *Our Echo of Sudden Mercy* (Next Page Press, 2022) and *The Flayed City* (Kaya Press, 2017).

Ahmad Almallah is a poet from Palestine. His first book of poems, *Bitter English* (2019), was published in the Phoenix Poets Series from the University of Chicago Press. His new book is *Border Wisdom* (Winter Editions, 2023).

Karen Leona Anderson* is the author *Receipt* (Milkweed Editions, 2016) and *Punish Honey* (Carolina Wren Press, 2009).

Edwina Attlee* is the author of two pamphlets, *Roasting Baby* (if a leaf falls press, 2016) and *the cream* (Clinic, 2016). She teaches history to students of architecture in London.

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Mary Jo Bang is a poet and translator. Her most recent book is *A Film in Which I Play Everyone* (Graywolf Press, 2023).

Michael Bazzett* is the author of *If Today Were Tomorrow* (Milkweed Editions, 2024), a book of translations of Humberto Ak'abal's poetry.

Carlo Cadenas is a freelance 3D artist and designer. His work combines his passions for typography and illustration to craft vibrant visuals.

Victoria Chang's latest book is *With My Back to the World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).

Jim Daniels's* books include *The Luck of the Fall* (Michigan State University Press, 2023) and *Gun/Shy* (Wayne State University Press, 2021).

Ellen Elder* is poetry coeditor at *Literary Mama*. She lived in Germany before recently relocating to Charleston, South Carolina.

Robert Fernandez is the author of *Scarecrow* (Wesleyan University Press, 2016), as well as *Pink Reef* (2013) and *We Are Pharaoh* (2011), both published by Canarium Books.

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D. A. Powell's books include *Repast* (2014) and *Useless Landscape, or A Guide for Boys* (2012), both published by Graywolf Press. He teaches at the University of San Francisco.

Sarah M. Sala* is the author of *Devil's Lake* (Tolsun Books, 2020), named a distinguished favorite for the Independent Press Awards.

Samyak Shertok's* poems appear in *Best New Poets*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *New England Review*, among others.

Bruce Snider is the author of three poetry collections, most recently *Fruit* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

Craig Morgan Teicher is the author of *Welcome to Sonnetville, New Jersey* (BOA Editions, 2021) and the essay collection *We Begin in Gladness: How Poets Progress* (Graywolf Press, 2018).

Tian-Ai (天爱)* is a writer, musician, and visual artist from Seattle. See more of their work at www.tian-ai.com.

* First appearance in *Poetry*

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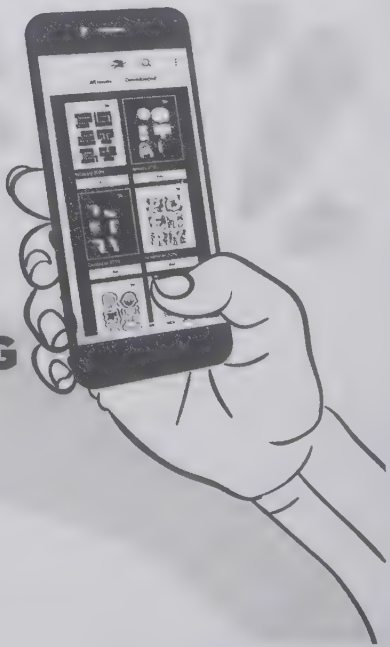

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Amy Hempel, Rick Moody, Cristina Garcia, Jenny Offill, Karan Mahajan, James Hannaham, Elizabeth Benedict, Adam Braver

Faculty, Poetry:
Henri Cole, Rosanna Warren, Campbell McGrath Richard Blanco, Megan Fernandes, Peg Boyers

Faculty, Non-Fiction:
Phillip Lopate, Thomas Chatterton Williams

Visiting Writers:
Mary Gaitskill, Paul Harding, Jamaica Kincaid, Caryl Phillips, Robert Pinsky, Joyce Carol Oates, John McWhorter, Francine Prose, Daniel Torday

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The Robinson Jeffers Tor House 2024 Prize for Poetry

The annual Tor House
Prize for Poetry
is a living memorial to
American poet
Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962)

$1,000 1st Prize Award
for an original, unpublished
poem not to exceed three pages.
$200 for Honorable Mention Awards

Final Judge: Sun Yung Shin

Open to poetry in all styles, ranging from experimental to traditional forms, including short narrative poems. Each poem should be typed on 8 1/2" by 11" paper, no longer than three pages. On a cover sheet include name, address, telephone number, email, titles of poems; bio optional. Multiple and simultaneous submissions welcome. There is a reading fee of $10 for the first three poems; $15 for up to six poems; and $2.50 for each additional poem. Make checks and money orders payable to the Tor House Foundation.

Postmark deadline
for submissions:
March 15, 2024

The Prize winner will be announced by May 15 on www.torhouse.org. Include an SASE for announcement of the Prize winner by mail. Poems will not be returned. For more information, visit our web site or contact us by e-mail.

To enter, mail poems, check or money order, and SASE if desired for notification of winners by mail, to:

Coordinator,
2024 Poetry Prize,
Tor House Foundation,
Box 223240, Carmel,
Ca 93922

Sponsored by:

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Tor House Foundation
P.O. Box 2713,
Carmel, CA 93921
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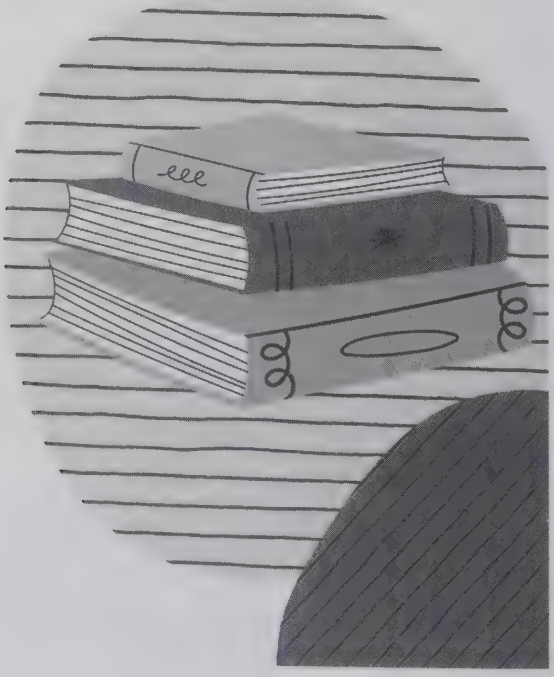

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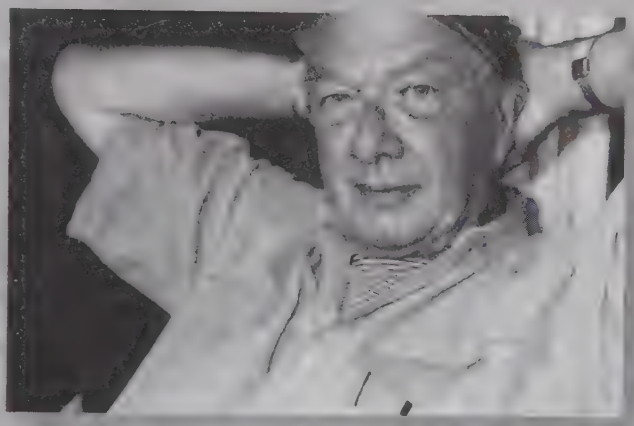

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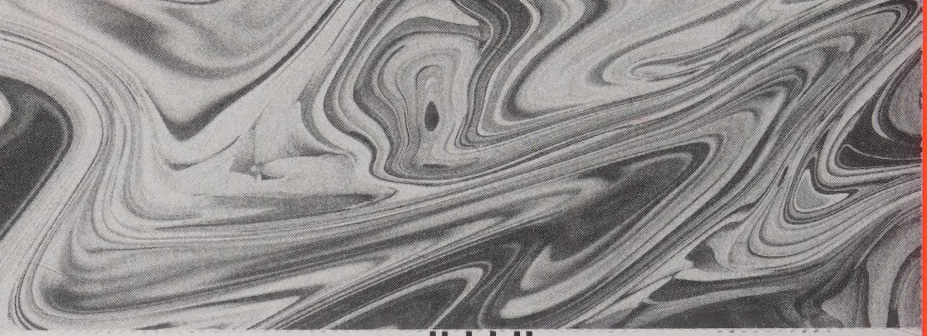

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